

VIRGINIA IRIS

Iris virginica L.

plant symbol = IRVI

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Alternate Names

Blue flag, southern blue flag, blue iris

Warning: The roots of Virginia iris are toxic when taken internally, without sufficient preparation.

Uses

Ethnobotanic: The Cherokee and other tribes in the southeastern United States are known to have used Virginia iris for its medicinal properties. The root was pounded into a paste that was used as a salve for skin. An infusion made from the root was used to treat ailments of the liver, and a decoction of root was used to treat “yellowish urine.” Virginia iris may have been

one of the iris species used by the Seminole to treat “shock following alligator-bite.”

Status

Please consult the PLANTS Web site and your State Department of Natural Resources for this plant’s current status (e.g. threatened or endangered species, state noxious status, and wetland indicator values).

Description

General: Iris Family (Iridaceae). Virginia iris is a perennial plant. The slightly fragrant flowers (4 cm long, 7 cm across) consist of 3 horizontal sepals, or “falls,” and 3 erect petals. The petals and sepals can vary in color from dark-violet to pinkish-white. The sepals have a splash of yellow to yellow-orange at the crest. Each plant has 2 to 6 flowers that bloom from April to May upon a single, erect, 3-9 dm tall stalk. The stalk is sometimes branched and has a slight zigzag appearance. The plant has 2 to 4 erect or arching, bright green, lance-shaped leaves that are flattened into one plane at the base. Leaves are 1 – 3 cm wide and are sometimes longer than the flower stalk. The fleshy roots (1-2 cm in diameter) are rhizomes that spread underground. Pale brown, variably shaped seeds are born in three-part fruit capsules (3-6 cm long, 1-2 cm wide).

Distribution: Virginia iris is common along the coastal plain from Florida to Georgia. For current distribution, please consult the Plant Profile page for this species on the PLANTS Web site.

Adaptation

This plant grows in wet areas and sometimes in shallow water in both fresh and brackish tidal marshes. It can be found in low savannas, thin woods and open meadows as well as along the edges of swamps, rivers, and ditches.

Establishment

Virginia iris is a sturdy plant that is easy to grow and, once established, needs very little care. They make lovely additions to the garden and are ideal for the borders of a garden pond. This is because the plants prefer moist to wet soils that are high in organic matter. The plants will grow best in mild climates where they can be grown in partial shade to full sun. The plants can be grown from seed, but are easiest to propagate through division. Seeds may be planted in the autumn, without pretreatment. To propagate by division, divide the plants either after flowering or when the new leaves just begin to appear in the spring. Cut the roots so that

each piece contains a portion the feeding roots, the rhizome, and a leaf fan. Place the rhizomes very near to the surface of the soil when planting. Allow 45 to 60 cm between plants. The plants grow best if divided every three to five years to thin out the colonies that form.

Pests and Potential Problems

Snails are known to eat the leaves.

Cultivars, Improved, and Selected Materials (and area of origin)

These plant materials are readily available from commercial sources.

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